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ABSTRACT

Some of the tensions in the adult literacy and English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) fields are explored from both the state and institutional level in Australia. In an effort to promote discussion at a national conference, several questions are posed regarding these and other issues: national goals/priorities/accountability, funding for professional development and curriculum development; bureaucratic management of adult literacy; collaboration among state and national bodies; the growth of the language and literacy fields beyond the knowledge and experience of national managers of those fields; implications of the new workplace literacy field; and characteristics of a sustainable system. (LB)

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STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT IN LANGUAGE AND LITERACY – OUTCOMES OR EMPIRES?

Notes prepared for address to ACAL National Conference Sydney October 1992

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In speaking to you today I will draw upon three sources of experience

- my bureaucratic experience in DETAFE in policy and management of access and equity programs including adult literacy

- my recent experience as an ACAL executive member

- my reflections upon projects and processes of ILY national projects and their implications.

I want to explore with you some of the tensions in the adult literacy (and ESL language) field/s and to some of the complexities facing managers at both State and institutional level. In so doing, I want to pose more questions than proffer solutions, and because I am anxious to promote discussion about these perceptions and concerns (at least to see whether they strike any resonance with you; whether you share them or see it quite differently) I will be somewhat less subtle and certainly briefer than I believe the issues deserve, and which a more academic presentation would allow.

In order to crystallise the issues I would like to review the past. So much has happened since 1990 that it is hard to remember what it was like; what we thought was 'normal'. I go back to statements I made at an ACAL conference in 1986 for my point of reference.

I described adult literacy provision as being do goodish, – poorly linked to the policy developments in equal opportunity, I found that it had poorly developed mechanisms for accountability, it was unsophisticated in matters of formal curriculum development, there was little attention to evaluation, a reliance upon anecdote rather than data. Altogether – it needed to face the issues about

- becoming clear about its goals and priorities
- becoming bureaucratically more sophisticated
- becoming more rigorous and accountable
- becoming more engaged in system change rather than or in addition to simply teaching students

and thus becoming more powerful.

I wanted adult literacy to become more self managed as a field of endeavour, but at the same time I set out to manage it. It proved difficult to manage. The reasons for this include

– a lack of funding available to infrastructure so that higher level management and specialist skills were undeveloped eg particularly professional development or curriculum development

- marginalisation of the adult literacy program (and relative isolation of the DILGEA funded AMES) meant that those in the program had marginal attachment to, and little trust in bureaucratic processes, nor was there familiarity with the most basic of strategic process – planning and budgeting

- a precarious past (few permanent officers, and consequently little status in hierarchical terms and a reliance on hourly paid staff who could be sacked when funds dried up) meant that few people had a longer term view – there was no vision of what could be – but a preoccupation with survival.

All these are indicators of a very unpowerful group.

Well, a lot has changed since 1986 – and even more since 1990 – for a start, instead of talking about what you should do – I am now talking about the problems that confront us.

We are now talking about a program which has high political priority, a greatly increased resource base, a multitude of projects and activities, which has experienced rapid growth and where there are now some real possibilities of reaching a much greater number of those in need of literacy services than ever before.

I am reminded of that line –'if everything's so good why am I feeling so bad?'.

I think it is because

- we are still an unpowerful group

- we have grown in size but remain at the margins and not in the mainstream – the mainstream has shifted

- we are a field that is still reactive, having things done to it rather than shaping the agenda.

Why is this so?

I was reflecting on this with regard to the ebb and flow in the fortunes of SACAL. When I began work in adult literacy I spent half my time responding to ministerials generated by SACAL who were jumping up and down about funding cuts. I regarded these as an irritant. This was made more so because all of SACAL was made up of TAFE literacy lecturers. I then set about 'managing' adult literacy. There has virtually been no ministerial in the last three years; SACAL is examining its role, the program continues to grow.

What happened was that I "stole" SACAL's agenda and from my bureaucratic position was able to 'do' what SACAL could only advocate for, and I could through policy, funding, personnel and networking processes always stay in advance of SACAL.

I think something similar has happened to ACAL post ILY, and I think all senior managers in adult literacy and language services in NSW, Victoria, Queensland, Northern Territory, Tasmania and Western Australia feel that to some extent that it has happened in our relations with the Commonwealth during 1991 and 1992.

We talk about collaboration and cooperation but the tensions between ACAL and the Commonwealth and between the Commonwealth and the States are palpable and destructive of the hopes many of us had in International Literacy Year.

Those of us involved in the develcpment of a national strategic framework for adult literacy and english language under the auspices of AEC/MOVEET continue to work with goodwill and concern about the task of envisaging and managing the sort of literacy and language provision we believe is necessary and appropriate (for appropriate read efficient, effective, equitable) but we do so with a sense of constant amazement at the incongruities between the sorts of principles for effective management of change with which I am familiar, and the high handed and pre-emptive approaches taken by the so called partners to the States.

All this is occurring in the climate which has recently seen the painful process of negotiation to form ANTA and acceptance of joint planning as the central approach to be taken in national policy development and implementation.

I want to look behind the behaviour however; because what it implies to me is that there is no common vision held by the key States and the Commonwealth officers who manage literacy and language provision; it is commonly held beliefs and understandings which allow us to work together on, and through change.

Traditionally managers in literacy and language have been drawn from the field or from related fields.

Now, for perhaps the first time at national level, policy and programs are driven by bureaucrats who are not educators; (that's about as mainstreamed as you can get). Listen to the language – we are still talking about learning and curriculum and outcomes defined broadly in human social as well as vocational and economic terms – ours is still an educational debate – their's is a debate about the management of resources in a political context.

These are not necessarily in conflict – in fact the best policy decisions and management practices will flow from a combination of these skills and perspectives.

But what has happened it seems to me is that the Commonwealth, having been effectively influenced by officers committed to some vision of adult literacy which was shared by States' representatives and which was profoundly influenced by ACAL, has in fact run away with the agenda and the money, leaving us all feeling relatively powerless, and certainly not trusting.

It has also distanced itself from ACAL on which it once depended for knowledge vision networks and strategies.

The growth of the language and literacy fields in Commonwealth terms has outstripped the knowledge and experience of those managing it, and to some extent this has happened also in States which have experienced rapid expansion. The advantage State Systems have in coping with this rapidity of change is that they still have connections to the field and that fund of educational thinking on which to draw and which provides a constant critique of their plans and actions. The Commonwealth officers coping with their avalanche of work and pressure do not have the same access to advice or support.

I am reminded of the furore which erupted at an Australian Women in Education Coalition conference in Melbourne in the late eighties when Denise Bradley (then Women's Adviser in Education in SA, now Deputy Vice Chancellor University of South Australia) when she remarked that as women who had moved rapidly into senior positions in alien bureaucracies and with lots of talent but little experience we were all operating 'at the margins of our competence'.

I think any field that grows rapidly will experience this, and a field that has been so starved of resources, had little policy attention few promotion positions, no political exposure and a client orientation, rather than a system orientation, is particularly vulnerable.

There is a sense of critical mass in management infrastructure – have this mass; (the right mix of talent, positions, structures and resources) and you can manage a vast empire but without it it is a struggle to service and to stay on top of the roller coaster. Without these resources we cannot even describe the outcomes of what we currently do let alone evaluate and refine provision to do more precise and different things.

When you also regard the sources of advice and support that helped get the roller coaster underway as vested interests, or irritants to your bureaucratic process then the way is open for some significant problems to emerge as growth is actively pursued. At the very least every system of provision now needs to create some positions in professional development, curriculum development and in policy in order to digest and comment thoughtfully upon what is emerging from the ALLP and Commonwealth initiatives let alone set about shaping State provision to meet new nationally agreed goals and priorities. There are simply too few experienced people to carry the level of activity and to manage the implementation of all that we have learned in the last two years from national projects and State planning activities.

I am reminded of the complexities of the environmental debate and the difficulties greenies face in promoting conservation values and providing a profound, consistent critique of resource development proposals without simply being labelled as anti development or in Hewson speech – 'anti jobs'.

We face that dilemma now as ACAL repositions itself to articulate a vision of the future which can inform the growth of the field rather than react to pressures from and actions taken by governments. As State bureaucrats we are attempting to form a vision and encapsulate this in the AEC/MOVEET strategic framework in a way that will move the field forward to that vision in a coherent way and promote intelligent debate that will inform that process.

I want to look at the implications of rapid growth in the literacy program, particularly with reference to workplace literacy, and examine the current relationship between vocational education and literacy in this period of political attention.

Workplace literacy is growing rapidly. It is a new field. Experience is in very short supply. One implication of this is that there is great pressure on practitioners to perform at high levels because the program has been identified as an 'entrepreneurial' one rather than a 'service' in some major providers. There is as a result an increasing separation structurally and in style between traditional adult literacy practitioners (and their practice), and the newly prominent workplace program.

Structurally, in South Australia we conceived workplace education as a literacy and language service, a subset of the two contributing disciplines and of these two identifiable program areas. However, the rapidity of growth has quickly lead to this field becoming a third and distinct area.

The challenge we now face is maintaining workplace literacy and language as an integral part of general program planning and as an integral part of the professionally linked group of literacy personnel.

People often want to specialise but there are great advantages in allowing great mobility and flexibility across the literacy/language program and maximising the opportunities for individuals to teach in a variety of contexts.

The career paths and professional linkages of those who find themselves delivering workplace literacy as part of the business arm of their organisations, as is the case in NSW and Victoria to some degree might look quite different from those who are still structurally attached to their discipline base. I worry about the seduction of 'business', and the pressures of making money in a field that undoubtedly should be business like but that should have a strong equity base.

However, moving rapidly almost inevitably means that the implications of these arrangements are not thought through.

Workplace practitioners talk about the integration of literacy and language into vocational education and training but what they mean is that their separate programs are incorporated into the enterprise training strategy.

Few considered the optimum size for their program, and the proportion of effort that should be directed towards achieving the long term incorporation of literacy and language competencies into vocational curriculum, and a long term reduction of dependency on programs of intervention.

In addition, there is a frightening chase after WELL funds (DETAFE colleges submitted proposals totalling over $1 million this year). I wonder about the level of examination of the management infrastructure, professional development and staff recruitment and induction costs and strategies needed to ensure quality which has occurred in this process, and about the capacity within systems to provide the appropriate policy driven support and leadership to this element of the field which is doing pioneering and highly publicised and visible work.

I think that workplace is one area where we should be utilising some of our best most experienced teachers - but pressures of growth have lead to recruitment off 'the street', induction on the run and a compromise of the growing consensus on qualifications and experience with which we define 'competence' to teach.

I for one would be very unhappy to see workplace provision grow to exceed the size of 'campus' based literacy provision in TAFE and unhappy if our structural arrangements define workplace as the major TAFE response to the literacy or language needs of industries and workers.

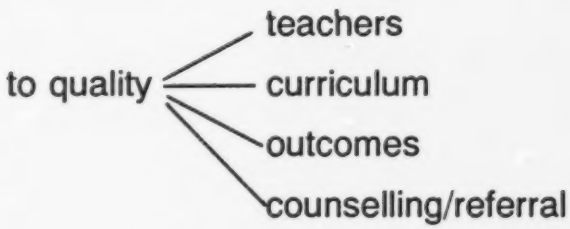
In saying this I'm not wishing to be merely critical – we may have little choice about some matters, but at least we could know what we are doing, consider explicitly the dangers and strategies of our actions.

Perhaps we should resist the seduction of growth and look to the conservation movement for a new concept to inform our approach to management of literacy and language? I am attracted to the notion of sustainability. There are limits to growth, if growth is going to be accompanied by improvements and maintenance of quality.

What might be the characteristics of a sustainable system of provision?

- a relationship between size and structure including geographical factors, resources, complexity of program
- a time frame which is evolutionary not reactive
- policy that is broad, encompassing of pragmatic pressures inclusive and inspirational
- structures for succession involving career mobility, promotion, professional development and professional renewal

- a view of optimal size – critical mass which incorporates a broad commitment



- established practices for accountability and evaluation which make the whole system 'problematic' and subject to review and which do not focus inclusively on prescribed outcomes for students

- a capacity for and high regard for innovation, risk taking and experimentation with acceptance of consequent failure or less than spectacular success

- communication patterns which are diverse, functional. affective and effective to maintain 'human element' in system and which emphasise participation rather than control

- multiple points of leadership and support

In addition to these a sustainable system will be recognisable by the high level of drive and direction from within and by a capacity to contract when resources dry up, to sustain itself in a prolonged period of drought or other adversity (I am thinking of a period of Hewson government) and to flower again in the good times.

If we manage adult literacy and language provision with a view to establishing a sustainable system we might not have to worry quite as much about operating at the margins of our competence and energy, we might have systems which consistently deliver the outcomes needed by students and we will know what these outcomes are and how to achieve them in a variety of contexts.

If those of us managing in systems can resist the seduction of bigness and of our indispensability, if we manage our provision in 'trust' for the next generation and conserve our human and intellectual and financial resources by operating more strategically then perhaps we will not be disappointed by what is created over the next few years. If we lose sight of students and concentrate on managing our empires as managers we will have a lot to answer for. A focus on students will bring us together – a focus on empires will drive us apart.

The ground is shifting as we speak.

Who then, helps the managers to challenge their ideas and to change their practices. Where are the mentors to those driving the systems, who extends their concepts of that is both possible and desirable.

This ACAL conference is virtually the only opportunity which currently exists for managers to do this and to look at management issues in the strongly developed context of the educational field of adult literacy not in the rarefied disembodied context of 'management development', and that is one of the reasons I have involved myself in ACAL and hold such hopes for its future role in reminding all of us of the importance and danger of what we are doing.